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CHAPTER II

THE MEANING OF 'TALLENSI'

Tribal Divisions

101 TALELAND is, as we have seen, merely a portion of a far greater, ecologically uniform region, marked off only by an artificial boundary. The same kind of subsistence farming is practised throughout the whole region of which Taleland forms a part. The culture of its inhabitants likewise represents a far more widely spread type. Before we embark on our sociological analysis we must know what sort of a unit we are dealing with. Have the people of Taleland any form of cultural or structural unity and singularity that differentiates them from neighbouring socio-geographical areas? Or are they a fraction of a greater society arbitrarily circumscribed to suit the convenience of the field worker?

101 619 The question is not so easy to answer as might be expected. For the natives of Taleland, like the other so-called 'tribes' north of the Gambaga scarp, have no obvious political unity distinguishing them from like political units. In terms of their own political and social organization there is no single government exercising authority over all the people of Taleland, and only over them, within their own defined territory. This has been the most serious obstacle confronting British administration in this area.[1] We must approach the problem from a different angle.

197 101 In the literature and in administrative practice the inhabitants of Taleland are called the Tallensi[2] and are distinguished as a 'tribe' from neighbouring 'tribes', the Kusaasi on the east, the Namnam or Nabdam on the north, the Nankansi or Gorənsi (in Talni, *Gərisi*) on the west, the Mamprusi on the south of them. All these groups speak dialects of Mole-Dagbane. But Kusal, Nabte, and Gərni are closely akin to Mole, whereas Talni and Mampurule have closer affinities with Dagbane. These dialect areas have no strict boundaries. At the frontiers one passes through [191] intermediate zones where the people speak intermediate dialects or are equally familiar with two contiguous dialects. But it is clearly recognized, both by the natives and by outside observers, that the tribes enumerated above have more in common with one another linguistically than any of them have with the peoples of the same cultural type farther away, such as the Woolisi (usually called the Kassena in the literature and by the

[1] For an outline of Tale political organization and a discussion of some of the theoretical problems raised by it, see *African Political Systems*, edited by M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Oxford, 1940.

[2] *Sc.* Talense (Rattray), Talansi (Cardinall), sing. Talenga, Talanga. This form, correctly Talənsi, sing. Talənə, is taken from the dialect of the Zuarungu district (Gorəni, or in the dialect of the Tallensi, Gərni). The artificial spelling I use has been adopted to show that the Tallensi regard this phonetic form as a foreigners' version of the name by which they designate themselves. In their own dialect (Talni) they call themselves Talis, sing. Talənə. Talni forms will henceforth be used for all vernacular words in the text.

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society is a function of its segmentary relations to other like regions and to more inclusive regions, up to the limit of the widest frame of social reference relevant for that region. In consequence, social groups are identified in relation to one another by a technique of contraposition. This is very clearly seen among the Tallensi.

Cultural Segmentation of the Tallensi

From Zuarungu one can see the silhouette of the Tong Hills bounding the horizon seven miles to the south. That, say the people of Zuarungu, is where the Tallensi live. As a group they consider themselves to be quite distinct from the Tallensi, though many individuals have kinsmen among the latter—their own mothers' people, or more distant cognatic kinsmen, or affinal relatives. Even nowadays, when women and children can travel safely anywhere, intercourse between Zuarungu and the Tallensi is confined almost entirely to trade in the markets. In former times it was more than a Zuarungu man's life was worth to venture amongst the Tallensi unless he had kinsfolk there to protect him.

Between Zuarungu and the Tong Hills stretches an unbroken chain of settlements—Biuk, Ba'ari, Zubiun, Tongo, Wakii, and Soog. The people of Biuk speak Gorni and consider themselves an outpost of Zuarungu. But a number of them live across the watercourse which separates their land from that of Ba'ari, side by side with Ba'ari families and farming on Ba'ari soil.[1] Such overlapping of contiguous settlements is common. The Ba'ari people are Tallensi, though a great many of them understand Gorni as easily as their mother tongue owing to their contiguity with Goris. Gorni forms have even crept into their vocabulary. Between them and their Gore neighbours there is much intermarriage; but the insistence on their distinctness remains. The picture is the same from whichever direction one enters Taleland. At Gar I was once told 'We are Namnam-Tallensi'—an accurate enough description of their linguistically and culturally intermediate position.

And yet, everywhere along the frontier the Tong Hills are pointed out as the real centre of the Tallensi. To the testimony of their neighbours may be added that of the Administration which has always regarded the Tallensi as a distinct, if amorphous, political unit.

The easiest if most superficial approach to the social structure of a society is through the nomenclature of social identification, the techniques by which people sort out their relations to one another in order to know how to conduct themselves. But nomenclature, like the conduct it tends to precipitate, is always a function of a situation, not an absolute classification.

Foreigners and their neighbours have a single label for all the Tallensi. The latter equally make no distinction in nomenclature between one Goran and another, or one Nabt and another, no matter where he may come from, when the circumstances require no more precise specification.

This technique of identification is based on locality, direction, propinquity, and actual or alleged contrasts of language and institutions; it is a technique of contraposition arising from the segmentary structure of the society, and is the commonest method of social classification employed

[1] And Biuk is also linked to the Tallensi by clanship as we shall see (Ch. IV).

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segment of the lineage whose head always takes the title of *Yikpɛmdaan*[1] and has the duty of sacrificing to the collective ancestors of the lineage on behalf of all its members. Among clans that have tɛndaanas the senior tɛndaana often has to build his homestead on the site of the founding ancestor's homestead; and when a tɛndaana dies his successor takes possession of the ancestral homestead and his children move out. But many other arrangements exist all serving the same end of keeping alive the idea of the lineage home.

In the lineage we are discussing the three homesteads of the members stand on ancestral land quite close to the graves of the lineage ancestors, Doohraan, Damtii, and Nɔpugzabɔr. When Deemzeet formally became the head of the lineage his homestead housed the lineage *bɔyar* and other shrines of its common ancestors, and his gateway became the lineage *zanɔr*. The ancestral graves of this lineage are actually on land owned by its members. This is not always the case. Changes in the ownership of land as the population shifts frequently result in the land surrounding the ancestral graves of a lineage-segment passing into the hands of members of another segment of the same lineage, sometimes even into the hands of members of a neighbouring clan. The spot continues, nevertheless, to be regarded as the *daboog* of the lineage whose ancestral graves lie there. The conception of the lineage home is split. For jural and social purposes it is the *de facto* home of the lineage, the place where its head actually resides. The site of the ancestral home, marked by the graves of the ancestors, comes to be regarded primarily as the religious focus of the lineage.

The Influence of Lineage Localization in the Social Life

This fact, that in the older settlements the core of a lineage is a locally organized unit, and that its location is associated with its ancestor spirits on the one hand and its patrimonial land on the other, moulds the entire life of its members. The corporate unity and identity of a lineage is a real and tangible thing when its male members can see one another every day, and when most of them, certainly most of their leading men, can gather together easily and in a very short time to consider and take action in affairs of common interest. Classificatory kinship is no mere formality where an individual's childhood companions are his or her own siblings and ortho-cousins of various degrees; where a man's daily intercourse is carried on chiefly with close agnatic kinsmen, and almost entirely with men of the same patrilineal descent, in his section or settlement; where a man can readily, and indeed is compelled to, by the fact of physical accessibility in a culture lacking rapid and indirect means of communication, have immediate and almost exclusive recourse to his patrilineal kin for help in economic activities, support in maintaining his rights or performing his duties, advice and guidance in the conduct of his life, or solace in misfortune. Ceremonial co-operation is not an empty formula

[1] Tallensi are poor etymologists and various equally plausible etymologies are suggested for this title. The most probable is that it is compounded of *yir*, house; *kpiim*, spirits of the dead, and *daana*, custodian or master. This can be translated 'Custodian of the House of the Spirits of the Lineage Ancestors'.

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significance. From childhood on a person's relation to the economic system is chiefly determined by sex. In the kinship system sex operates as a differentiating factor from an equally early age, from the time, in fact, when a child learns to designate like-sex siblings by different terms from opposite-sex siblings. Local, lineage, or family institutions also act as differentiating factors, though not in the same way. This is a consequence in part of the peculiarities of Tale political structure. Local groupings, clans and lineages are asymmetrically linked *inter se* and with communities outside the Tale area proper by political, genealogical, territorial, or ritual ties. The most striking case of this sort is presented by the Hill Talis who have immemorial ritual links with villages and genealogical groups among Dagomba, Mamprussi, Bulisi (Builsa), Woolisi (Kassena), Mossi, and other neighbouring peoples. Each of the Hill communities has its exclusive associates in these foreign areas. The people of Sii were traditionally associated with the Bulisi, the people of Gorogo with the Woolisi, the Kpata'ar clan with certain villages of Black Dagomba, and so forth. There was in former times, and is even more so now, a constant traffic between the Tong Hills and the outside areas linked with the clans dwelling there—pilgrims coming to the Fertility Shrines in the Hills and Talis paying ceremonial visits to their associates. But the economic and political by-products of this traffic were most important. In this way a range of geographical and social contacts was, and is, available to a member of the Hill clans which no Namoos had, and among the Hill clans themselves the actual contacts varied from clan to clan. The Namoos again have their traditional political associates among the Mamprussi. It is especially interesting to note that the Mamprussi associates of the Hill Talis and the Mamprussi associates of the Namoos belonged to a single political structure; yet the latter would not, a generation ago, have hesitated to overpower and enslave any Hill Talis they encountered defenceless.

Factors of this sort become significant only after adolescence and more so in the life of men than of women; but they are operative even in childhood. The Black Dagomba guests at a Kpata'ar elder's homestead are familiar figures to his children; and one sign of the interest taken in them by the children is the fact that most Kpata'ar youths understand and easily speak the dialect of the Black Dagomba, whereas other Tallensi do not.